

Fort Fisher

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Within days of the firing on Fort Sumter, United States president Abraham Lincoln ordered a naval blockade of all Southern ports. To compete with the industrial might of the North, the agricultural South was forced to look toward Europe for supplies to feed and fuel the Confederate war machine. The flow of foreign aid from across the sea would determine the tide of battle on land. Throughout the war, the fortunes of the Confederacy would be moored, or tied, to the docks of Southern harbors.

Even before North Carolina seceded, orders were given “to commence operations on Federal Point, and to locate and construct sand batteries there so as to command the entrance of the inlet.” By September 1861, the Confederate batteries (gun pits) guarding New Inlet would be officially named Fort Fisher. Located twenty miles south of Wilmington, where the east bank of the Cape Fear River gave way to the Atlantic Ocean, it would grow to be the largest and strongest earthwork fort in the world.

By the summer of 1862, Fort Fisher had had several previous commanders, but none so capable as Colonel William Lamb. On July 4, 1862, he received an order to proceed to Fort Fisher and take command. Lamb recalled: “I went immediately and assumed command and before sunset of that day, had thoroughly inspected the works. I determined at once to build a work of such magnitude that it could withstand the heaviest fire of any guns in the American navy. Shortly after obtaining permission, I commenced the new Fort Fisher, and from that time, the summer of 1862, until the morning of December 24, 1864, I never ceased to work.”

With the fort’s troops, supplemented by the labor of five hundred slaves, there were at times as many as a thousand men at work on the fort, sometimes working seven days a week. One observer described the task: “These forts made of sand were constructed by these slaves with wheelbarrows pushed and pulled on gangways. The turf was transported from the marshes in the same way. It was very interesting to see two or three hundred wheelbarrows rolling in unison from the points of loading to those of dumping returning in a circle and passing the loaders who shovel in hand threw sand in the barrows as they passed without stopping.”

The design of the fort was unusual. There were only two walls, a land face and a sea face. It looked like the number 7 or an upside-down L. The land face extended across Federal Point for over a third of a mile, from river to ocean. A huge earthen wall, it consisted of sixteen mounds, thirty-two feet high and forty-three feet thick, sodded with marsh grass to hold them intact. Gun pits were constructed between the mounds, which mounted twenty heavy guns. Within each mound was a bombproof, or underground room. Passageways connected many of these underground rooms.

In front of the land face, all vegetation was removed for a half mile to allow a clear field of fire. A nine-foot palisade fence of sharpened timbers was erected just in front of the land face. The palisade was zigzagged to allow the defenders to enfilade, or crossfire, against attackers. Notches were cut in the fence for muskets. Five to six hundred yards in front of the palisade lay a system of land mines.

The corner of the fort, where the land and sea faces met, was a huge work called the Northeast Bastion. Here the walls turned at a ninety-degree angle and descended south for over a mile in the direction of New Inlet. There were twenty-four heavy guns on the sea face.

At the end of the line overlooking the inlet was Mound Battery. It was an engineering marvel for the day, standing some sixty feet high. It took six months to build, even with the assistance of two steam-operated railways supplementing the labor of the men. Completed, it mounted two guns that guarded New Inlet. It was also the primary signal station for communicating with blockade-runners.

By 1863 Wilmington was the last major seaport in the Confederacy open to the outside world. Blockade-runners steamed swiftly from the neutral provinces of the Bahamas and Bermuda, extending the lifeline that lifted Southerners' sinking spirits. The ships brought much-needed European guns, cannon, ammunition, cloth, and medicines, as well as highly coveted luxury items. In exchange, blockade-runners took on tobacco, naval stores, and cotton. The proximity (closeness) of these islands, just a two- to three-day trip, made Wilmington the ideal port of call.

At Wilmington, luxury items were auctioned. The military supplies were loaded onto the rickety trains of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad. The 250-mile supply route led to Petersburg, Virginia, where the material (equipment) was dispensed to General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Late in the war, General Lee himself prophetically stated that if Wilmington fell, he could no longer sustain his army.

In May 1864 a young black man named Charles Wesley, who claimed to be Colonel Lamb's servant, escaped to the Federal blockading fleet. He gave valuable and accurate information confirming what the Federals had already suspected: Fort Fisher was undermanned and ripe for the taking.

On December 24, 1864, the largest fleet assembled by the United States Navy up to that time anchored off Fort Fisher. In an attempt to damage the fort, the Union fleet harmlessly detonated a powder boat containing more than a hundred tons of gunpowder. It then shelled the fort severely but inconclusively. Frustrated, the Federals sailed away, leaving the Confederates in possession of the fort, a belated Christmas gift.

Three weeks later, on Friday, January 13, 1865, the Union armada (fleet of ships) returned, more determined than ever. Approximately fifty-eight warships, mounting more than six hundred cannon, unleashed a three-day barrage, throwing about 20,000 projectiles into the besieged fort. On Sunday, January 15, thousands of soldiers, sailors, and marines attacked the land-face

defenders. After a bloody six-hour contest, the small garrison was overwhelmed and the fort captured. The Cape Fear River was closed to blockade-running.

The two sides combined had almost two thousand killed or wounded men. Nearly seventy Federals eventually received the Medal of Honor. Colonel Lamb was severely wounded, captured, and taken north. Five weeks later, Wilmington fell. Less than two months later, General Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant, and the war was all but over.

*At the time of this article's publication, Ray Flowers worked as a site assistant at Fort Fisher State Historic Site.